

# ABOUT PANIC ATTACKS

## What Are They?

Panic attacks are quite common, occurring in about 25% of the population. They are one of the symptoms that accompany: acute stress, post-traumatic shock, or sometimes agitated depression. They are slightly more common in people with asthma or diabetes, or if you have been taking stimulants (caffeine, amphetamines), or if you are withdrawing from tranquillisers.

The experience may be very frightening, but they are not dangerous in themselves. They occur more frequently in women than men, yet also in healthy young adults. An attack can last for just a few seconds, or as long as an hour, or be experienced as a series of short attacks.

There is some evidence of an inherited potential. People who experience panic attacks also seem to be those who experience stress in their respiratory and cardiovascular system, rather than anywhere else. They can be affected by changes in hormone levels (as in menstruation or the menopause). There is also a strong connection to the levels of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) in the bloodstream.

They are defined by a sudden onset of intense apprehension, fear or terror accompanied by physical symptoms such as difficulty in breathing, dizziness, palpitations, chest pains, tingling sensations, shaking, sweating, and feelings of unreality.

## What Happens?

The panic attack often involves quite strong **physical feelings** or body reactions such as feeling breathless, one's heart racing, feeling suffocated or smothered, sudden sweating, tingling feelings, hot or cold flushes, clammy hands, shaking or trembling, ringing in the ears, upset stomach, nausea, faintness or dizziness. The **emotional feelings** involved might be a sudden rush of intense fear, or the person feeling they are losing control, or that something awful might happen to them. The **thoughts** that accompany panic attacks often include; *"I am going mad"*, *"I am going to die"*, *"I am having a stroke or heart attack"*, *"I am going to embarrass myself"*, *"I'm not normal."* **Behaviours** associated with panic attacks include: the inability to sit still, fidgeting, snapping at people, pacing up & down, having to leave the room suddenly, frequent yawning, or sighing.

Sometimes, the fear of having another panic attack makes one limit one's actions and either avoid places where you might be likely to have one: busy shops, crowded places; or avoid doing certain things for the same reason; exerting yourself, being alone, going to the cinema, having an argument, etc. These are called **Avoidance Behaviours**. Sometimes these can build up so as really to constrain your life.

Panic attacks can last for a few seconds, or can continue for a longish period – leaving one feeling shaken, tense and exhausted. People can feel as if they are having a heart attack, or a stroke, and the first time one happens, they often call out their G.P., or an ambulance. Once, you have been diagnosed as having panic attacks or panic disorder, this sort of medical intervention should not be necessary as there are a number of other things that you can do for yourself.

Panic attacks can sometimes be predicted, especially if they have happened to you in similar circumstances. Sometimes, they are unpredictable, and – within a few seconds – you can be in a state of panic. Sometimes, one can wake up suddenly from sleep in a state of panic, which is very frightening as there is no warning of an onset. The fear of dying during such night-time panics is quite common. A form of very shallow breathing called hyper-ventilation is also quite common.

The fear of having such a panic attack can almost be as bad as the panic itself. Avoidance behaviours are quite common. If you are interpreting things as dangerous or horrible, they may seem more so and then you are in a vicious spiral. However, don't panic! – Panic attacks **are** treatable. It **is** possible to reduce the frequency of panic attacks by addressing one's general levels of anxiety and stress. It **is** possible to control an actual panic attack by taking a few very simple measures. Persistent panic attacks can also be treated pharmacologically now.

# WORKING WITH PANIC ATTACKS

If you experience reasonably frequent panic attacks, there are some things that you can do to reduce the likelihood of having them; to prevent one happening; or even to stop an actual attack.

## **Reduce Any Related Problems:**

Many people who have panic attacks find that they are generally overstressed. If the panic attacks are related to your general level of stress, you **must** do something about this first. Aerobic exercise, relaxation tapes, meditation, and some cognitive therapy can all be quite affective. Some people have a drinking problem. The alcohol itself makes you more likely to have a panic attack; then you have a drink 'to steady your nerves' and so a spiral begins. Try to stop this: get some help. Depression can also cause panic attacks, so this needs to be addressed: either by self-help techniques, counselling or psychotherapy, or by medication, or by a combination of these. Some people have experienced a severe trauma, which is still unresolved. This can also precipitate panic attacks and some form of treatment (medication), as well as some form of therapy, is almost usually advisable to start with.

## **Be More Aware:**

It is really necessary to become more aware of when you might start to feel panicky, or when you start to get over agitated: only then you can begin to do something about it. Even if the onset of a panic attack seems to be almost immediate, there is nearly always a build-up, even if it is a short one. Set up a mental alarm bell: get friends or family to give you some feed-back; become more aware of the possible 'triggers' to a panic attack; there may be also background factors like lack of sleep; general stress levels; too low blood sugar; poor breathing patterns; and / or situations where you feel less secure.

## **Remember:**

Remember panic attacks are the body's normal reactions that are being exaggerated. There almost certainly isn't an emergency. Nothing worse will happen. Stay in control. Accept the feelings that you have; run them through you and don't let them run you. Stay with the present – what is happening *now*. Don't run away, don't try to avoid the situation, or try to escape. Accept what feelings you have. Don't let them control you. Try not to fight the feelings of panic; float above them.

## **Do Something:**

It is important to do something, just one action that triggers you back into being in charge, and being in control. This might be to apply a little pressure at the pressure point in your wrist; or to make a deep long out-breath; or just to sit down. Then consciously relax any tense muscles. Focus on basic relaxation techniques. Imagine the anxiety going down, bit by bit. The fact you have done something puts you back in control and the panic lessens. All this becomes easier and more effective each time you do it. Gradually take yourself closer to or more often into the situations which give you panic attacks: choose 'safe' times and ways to do this: discuss the situation and your fears first; practice; and then follow through on the agreed plan of action. This is called "graded practice."

## **Breathe Out:**

In a panic attack, it is very common to struggle for the in-breath, or to take very high, short, fast breaths. It is important – indeed absolutely necessary – to breathe in gently (for a count of about two or three) and then breathe out very deeply (long: for a count of about six, seven or eight) in order to change the Oxygen and CO<sub>2</sub> balance in your blood stream. Doing this type of breathing for a few cycles should stop the attack. Focus on the short in-breath first, and then focus on the drawn-out out-breath. Force the air out of the open mouth and imagine you are fogging some glass – even try giving a little sigh with the out-breath. Then allow the breath to come back in, slowly and gently. Repeat this for a couple of times. Practice this regularly. Then you will know how to cope in a panic attack. Some people recommend breathing in and out of your cupped hands: that might work as well.

## TIPS TO PREVENT PANIC ATTACKS

- ✓ Reduce your general levels of stress. (There are a number of suggestions in earlier sections of this book.)
- ✓ Take regular exercise and try to relax regularly as well. This dual combination of exercise and relaxation is one of the best 'stress-busters' known to both modern medicine and all humankind.
- ✓ Avoid caffeine and fizzy drinks. Try to reduce levels of sugar, cigarettes and alcohol. Avoid other drugs and stimulants.
- ✓ See if you can find ways to express yourself better: you don't have to be assertive, just to be clear. Take a few moments to work out what you need to say, then say it.
- ✓ Do not worry about having to – sit down, or leave the room, or leave the store – quite suddenly. Just make a simple statement of a few words, "*I am sorry, I just have to leave for a few moments. I'll be back a bit later.*" Grab your things and then get out. Panic over.
- ✓ Develop various coping strategies: sit close to the door; use the acupuncture point in your wrists (same as for travel sickness); be clear about your timing (so you know when you can leave).
- ✓ Try not to bottle up your emotions. Talk to a friend about how you are feeling, or another close family member, or give someone a ring, or write in your journal.
- ✓ Learn to breathe properly. Use your diaphragm (just below the ribs). Put one hand on your belly and one on your chest. Breathe in slowly (count to four): both hands should rise; belly and then chest. Breathe out slowly (count to four): both hands should fall; chest then belly. Focus on expelling the out-breath.
- ✓ Eat regularly – a little and often; drink 1.5 - 2.0 litres of water per day; avoid processed foods with high salt or sugar levels; avoid all fizzy drinks; keep your blood sugar levels stable.
- ✓ Join a local support group or an internet site for people with panic attacks: if there isn't one locally, then – start one up and tell your GP and other local doctors. You won't feel so isolated, alone, weird etc. and you can discuss strategies and share feelings.
- ✓ Listen to your feelings: these are different from your thoughts. Ignoring them can cause internal stress. Ask yourself: "*What do I feel about this?*" There may be several different feelings.
- ✓ Don't set yourself too high expectations; avoid too many "should" or "must" statements; don't try to be 'best'; consider the more realistic concept of "good enough".
- ✓ Learn a relaxation technique (like the Autogenic Technique) and practise it regularly. If that doesn't work for you, join a Tai Chi class, or try some Pilates or Yoga exercises.
- ✓ Use imagery and 'take yourself' to that ideal beach, or the meadow of flowers, or beside a mountain stream. Keep that image in the forefront of your mind as you relax.
- ✓ Challenge some of your negative thought patterns: "*I can't do this*" or "*I can't stay here.*" "*I am going mad*" or "*Something dreadful will happen.*" You can; you are not; and it won't. Only you can change these thought patterns – and they are not your thoughts, this is the "*anxiety speaking.*" These thoughts are symptoms of your levels of anxiety.
- ✓ Try some positive thought forms, like affirmations. "*I am calm and in control.*" "*I have the power to change this.*" "*I feel strong and positive.*"
- ✓ Become more aware of the signals, and counteract them earlier. If you feel an attack coming on, think positively, sit down, breathe more easily. Take a few minutes.
- ✓ Don't depend on others being there, reassuring you, or doing it for you. It is better to rely on yourself. You can cope. You can change this pattern. It is relatively easy. These techniques actually work.